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Norway

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NORWAY

When I and whoever else was left of Black America finally got out of there, we met up in Norway. The war had taken years off our memory of each other. We had not integrated enough technology into our rituals of self-absorption to say for certain when we completely lost sight of the future. We had no unnatural access to the past, and what little we knew about our home was found only in the library.

Most of us arrived before the Fourth of July, just in time for the eve of Skt. Hans, the long, white nights of midsummer. We did not know then how many children would be born the following March, but our passion did not surprise the Norwegians, who were already used to a fecund spring season. The ambassadors Voltemand and Cornelius greeted us with the customary gentleness we came to expect.

Single Black women were encouraged to sleep with seven kinds of wildflowers pressed under their pillow in order to help them dream of the right man to marry, if they preferred a man. The custom, though regional, seemed to make sense to us in an oddly personal way, though our traditions had been forged thousands of miles from here in a climate too humid to tolerate sleep during the summer.

Illegal immigrants of the Norwegian underklasse, who had been cast out to make room for us, had been targeted by the government for stealing education. One euphemism we used for them was “excess” or “overskytende,” a word we could not pronounce easily. We called them “skytenders” instead, which made them sound a bit like the oppressors during slavery. This helped us to think we were better than them as we claimed their neighborhoods for our neighborhoods.

Courses in Norwegian were offered by the Bergen Offentlige Bibliotek, which welcomed us with a tour of the building. As the library had been built atop the former site of a brewery, we did not see any contradiction between studying language and enjoying a local pilsner or two.

Having little experience navigating fjords, we traded our skills in mathematics for lessons on how to sail the inlets through the fog and silence. We brushed up on alienation and deadpan, too.

Those of us who could not speak Norwegian, Russian, or Greek took jobs in tourist markets in Bergen. Those fluent in Swedish experienced the occasional disappointment of being mistaken for African. Some Africans wanted nothing to do with us after our exile from our second continent.

Three newspapers reported independently that the Black American had retained few competencies during the latest migration, but we garnered new ambitions faster than anyone expected, especially in the rail and fishing industries. Within months of our arrival, vestiges of the culture we had held on to for hundreds of years started to slip away into religion or mythology. The absence of history made the ones who had been the poorest indistinguishable from those who had been well-off.

180 Those most used to riding trains took over running the Norwegian State Railways (NSB). All season we delayed the trains out of kindness for the tourists rushing to catch the last trip out of town. Our night rides received top ratings in the Lonely Planet travel guide and one other tour book for English speakers in Scandinavia.

After two seasons of integration, it became harder to tell whom we belonged to and who belonged to us. When a sightseeing train arrived at the waterfall just before reaching Flåm, a man stood naked facing the water, his back facing all those just arrived. When we called out to him, our tongues stung from salt in the air. Was he one or the other? When we called out to him, he did not turn, but that may not have been his answer.

Once the laws promoting citizenship were revoked following hysteria about the murder of several young skinheads, another migration commenced in the general direction of Iceland, though not necessarily that far. It turned out that only a few of the murdered men were neo-Nazis, but because the purported assassin was suspected to be Negro, we were condemned as a group. *This is not a problem*, we emphasized even where our overcrowding in neighborhoods seemed to incite the most fear.

Trains running at high speeds often skipped a stop. The ones they missed, though not easy to predict, were noted on the board as “Harlem,” “St. Louis,” or “Detroit” for reasons we would eventually understand as gestures of friendship.

By the time we earned control over the cod- and salmon-farming industry, outcry amongst the Norwegians was muted by a desire to maintain business ties with us. Our preparation of *bacalao* was demanded by international grocers for its authentic flavor, as was our smoked salmon, which came to be known as “Blackfisk” among the best restaurateurs.

Of course there would have been no need to go to Norway if we had had anywhere else to go. It wasn’t fair that the land given to us belonged to someone else, but an international urgency to make recompense for egregious misdeeds perpetrated over centuries won over the standing values. The only thing to do is reckon with the present because the past bears costs that can never be added up. More brutality than could ever be accounted for. More stupidity than could ever be forgotten. More cruelty than could ever be enjoyed.

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When it rained, we ate flatbread and lutefisk at the tourist cafés and reminisced about Mississippi, Jamaica, and Brazil. We listened to stories about how cold it felt before the oil was found and how the churches were the center of all hope, one island town after another. We confessed how quietly we had been chased out of the worst cities in America, and how we were glad to be free of the hope that it could be any way else.

About a year after we first arrived, the statue of Edvard Grieg in the Festplassen, in front of the Rikstelefon in Bergen, was stolen. A note left in its place said in English, *Yeah, We took him. He’s ours now.*

The police searched the Fyllingsdalen neighborhood door-to-door, but there was no sign of Grieg’s statue. The conservatory committed to performing one of his sonatas each week until it was recovered. After a year, the students grew frustrated with the lack of electronic instruments and became less willing to participate in the concerts. “Grieg is dead!” one young woman shouted before she was expelled from the concert hall. Despite the turmoil, we had

become the most regular attendees at the free concerts, though most of us preferred his compositions from *Peer Gynt* and after.

In late summer, we swam in the mountain lakes atop Ulriken, at the edge of Bergen. It took the whole day to hike that far. Below, the city looked big enough to welcome all travelers. Most of the ice had melted, and as we entered the water, tiny frogs darted around us.

Norwegian fishermen were invited to move into the mountains above Ålesund and other port cities and make their living harvesting wild herbs and roots. When mixed with alcohol in a tincture, these remedies helped us to relax after a long day of hard work.